

WASHINGTON, DC—Congressman Peter DeFazio (D-Springfield) was joined by 23 of his colleagues on both sides of the aisle today when he sent a letter to Secretary of Agriculture, Thomas Vilsack, requesting that he expedite the process of Resource Advisory Committee (RAC) appointments. RACs, which were created as part of the Secure Rural Schools and Community Self-Determination Act in 2000, help to create and maintain family wage jobs in areas of Oregon which are currently suffering from unemployment rates as high as 16%.

“Rural counties in Southwest Oregon are already suffering from high unemployment and teetering on the economic brink. We need jobs and we need them now. Resource Advisory Committees have been highly effective at designing projects that create good paying jobs and that make needed improvements on public lands. We need RAC appointments in order to get projects out the door and put people back to work. These positions need to be filled quickly by the Secretary,” DeFazio said.

The purpose of the RACs is to bring together a diverse cross-section of local citizens to design and implement collaborative projects on national forests. The RACS have been a tremendous success. Over the last eight years, 55 RACs have been formed and have implemented over 5,000 projects, not one of which has been litigated. These projects may include road, trail, and infrastructure maintenance or removal; improvements in forest health; and the restoration, maintenance, and improvement of wildlife and fish habitat.

When Congress reauthorized the Secure Rural Schools Act in 2008, it created 69 new RACs for

a total of 124 RACs. Unfortunately, last year, due to the back-log of appointments, 89 of the total 124 RACs were unable to fulfill their responsibilities because they did not have enough approved members to constitute a quorum. As a result, of the \$52 million allocated to counties for RAC projects in 2008, only \$26 million has been committed to projects. Without approved RAC members, efforts to preserve and create jobs will continue to be stalled.

The letter is below:

December 04, 2009

The Honorable Thomas J. Vilsack

Secretary

U.S. Department of Agriculture

1400 Independence Ave., SW

Washington, DC 20250

Dear Mr. Secretary:

We are writing today to urge you to address implementation problems associated with the Secure Rural Schools and Community Self-Determination Act (PL 110-343). Specifically, we request that you quickly approve the appointment of Resource Advisory Committee members and provide necessary clarification of allowable activities as defined in Title III of the Act.

As you know, in 2000 the United States Congress passed, and the President signed, the Secure Rural Schools and Community Self-Determination Act (Act). The intent of this legislation was to give rural counties and school districts within forested areas relief from the decline in national forest receipts.

In 2008, Congress reauthorized the Act to give our rural counties the certainty they need to maintain schools, roads, law enforcement and critical public services.

As a part of that legislation, we included one of the most successful features of the Act, the establishment of local Resource Advisory Committees (RACs). The purpose of the RACs is to bring together a diverse cross-section of local citizens to design and implement collaborative projects on national forests. Over the last eight years, 55 RACs have been formed and have implemented over 5,000 projects. Of those 5,000 projects, not one has been litigated.

When Congress reauthorized the Act in 2008 an additional 69 RACs were created. Unfortunately, last year, 89 of the total 124 RACs were unable to fulfill their responsibilities to either Congress or their local communities because they lack sufficient approved members to constitute a quorum. Of the \$52 million allocated to counties for RAC projects in 2008, only \$26 million has been committed to projects due to lack of quorums or lack of approved charters. Without approved RAC members, efforts to preserve and create jobs have been stalled.

We understand that the Department has nearly 700 individuals awaiting RAC appointments. While we understand that you continue to work toward filling vacant positions at the Department, we are concerned that more immediate action is needed to approve these individuals expeditiously under the Federal Advisory Committee Act (FACA). Quick approval is needed to ensure RACs can meet their responsibilities, projects can be approved, and much needed jobs maintained and created.

We also request your assistance in providing clarification on the authorized uses of Title III funds. Under the PL 110-343, many previously authorized uses of Title III funds were eliminated and/or modified for a variety of reasons. Previously, counties were able to use Title III dollars to fund educational programs, to reimburse emergency services paid for by counties and performed on federal land, to maintain community service work camps, and to educate and provide resources to communities and homeowners in order to encourage prevention and reduce the impacts of wildfire. In light of recent changes, clarification is desperately needed to help define the scope of allowable reimbursements for approved activities.

In Section 401, Congress required the Secretaries of Agriculture and Interior to issue regulations to carry out the purposes of the Act. The timely issuance of regulations would help to resolve many of the unanswered questions associated with implementation of the Act. Since enactment of the program in October 2008, we have seen no evidence that the regulatory process is being initiated. Please provide Congress a clear timeline on your planned compliance with Section 401 of the Act.

Moving forward to resolve these important implementation and compliance concerns will aid efforts to preserve and create jobs. We appreciate your commitment to our rural communities, and we urge you to expeditiously resolve this backlog and make appropriate RAC appointments. We look forward to working with you to implement this critically important program to move forward with projects that will stimulate local rural economies.

Sincerely,

Peter DeFazio

Nick Rahall

Raúl Grijalva

Member of Congress

Member of Congress

Member of Congress

Rob Bishop

Greg Walden

Mike Thompson

Member of Congress

Member of Congress

Member of Congress

Travis Childers

Walt Minnick

Allen Boyd

Member of Congress

Member of Congress

Member of Congress

Cynthia Lummis

Cathy McMorris Rodgers

Kurt Schrader

Member of Congress

Member of Congress

Member of Congress

Don Young

Rick Boucher

Earl Blumenauer

Member of Congress

Member of Congress

Member of Congress

David Wu

Wally Herger

James Oberstar

Member of Congress

Member of Congress

Member of Congress

Denny Rehberg

Stephanie Herseth-Sandlin

Brian Baird

Member of Congress

Member of Congress

Member of Congress

Glenn Thompson

Ann Kirkpatrick

Heath Shuler

Member of Congress

Member of Congress

Member of Congress